

Protecting against chemical disasters Corzine touts two bills as way to keep the public safer

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After recent train accidents in South Carolina and Pennsylvania, U.S. Sen. Jon Corzine yesterday announced proposed legislation to make railways and surrounding cities safer from chemical accidents and terrorism.

Corzine (D-N.J.) cited the Jan. 6 train crash in South Carolina that caused a chlorine leak that killed nine people and injured more than 300 others, and yesterday's train derailment in a Pittsburgh suburb that sent rail cars into the Allegheny River leaking anhydrous hydrogen fluoride, a chemical used in steel production.

And with refineries and other chemical plants in the region, the communities of Linden, Elizabeth and Rahway are "in an extraordinary position of risk," the senator said during a media event in a conference room in Union County Sheriff Ralph Froelich's office.

Mayors from Elizabeth, Linden and Rahway, cities through which freight traffic passes, were present, along with hordes of reporters ready to grill Corzine on his bid for governor.

For as long as he could, however, Corzine steered the conversation toward two pieces of legislation. He plans to reintroduce the Chemical Security Act, which would regulate security standards at chemical facilities throughout the country, known targets for terrorism. A new bill, the Chemical Rail Security Act of 2005, would deal specifically with the transportation of hazardous chemicals, he said.

"All of you know about the recent accident in South Carolina," Corzine said. While that tragedy occurred in a small, rural town, "think of what would happen in Rahway, Elizabeth or Linden," Corzine said. "We're going to have an incredible tragedy if this is not attended to."

The chemical rail act would establish federal guidelines for the physical condition of rail cars, particularly those that transport hazardous materials.

It would also establish a coordinated notification system between federal, state and local law enforcement, aimed at better tracking the movement of hazardous material throughout the nation's rail system.

The sheriff and local police should know when hazardous material is passing through, Corzine said. "We need to have that information flowing."

The bill would also call for penalties for violations of rail security regulations and would provide whistleblower protection for those who notify officials of failures to comply.

The legislation was praised by local mayors and other elected officials.

"I'll feel more relieved when it's passed," said Linden Mayor John Gregorio, crediting the senator. There are 13,000 homes in the city, and freight lines pass through town. Linden is also home to the largest refinery on the East Coast. After the news conference, Gregorio added that the companies often hire police for extra security.

Since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, officers have stopped passersby who try to photograph or film the ConocoPhillips facility, said police Chief John Miliano.

Sheriff Froelich has previously identified key facilities and locations around Union County. The rail lines pass through Linden, Elizabeth and Rahway, said Elizabeth Mayor J. Christian Bollwage.

"It's a transportation issue that causes grave concern," Bollwage said.

"If we had any type of accident at all, it would literally shut down this part of the state," said Assemblyman Gerald Green (D-Union)

"We're not really here for a bashing of the chemical industries," said Rahway Mayor James Kennedy. "It's a broader issue of safety and how the chemicals are transported."

The pharmaceutical giant Merck & Co. straddles Linden and Rahway. "Our local economies are intertwined with all these chemical facilities," Kennedy said.

Corzine first introduced the Chemical Security Act shortly after Sept. 11, 2001.

There are 123 chemical facilities nationwide where a toxic worst-case scenario would put more than 1 million people at risk, Corzine said, citing the Environmental Protection Agency. Eight of those are in New Jersey, four in the southern part of the state and "four in the general region we live in."

The bill will deal with more than just guns and gates typically used to protect such facilities, said Rick Engler, director of the New Jersey Work Environment Council, an alliance of 65 labor, environmental and community organizations.

"It will deal with inherently safer technology," Engler said.